

NOTES OF AN ADDRESS BY PROFESSOR W. G. DE
BURGH GIVEN AT THE ANNUAL INSPECTION OF
THE CHARLOTTE MASON COLLEGE IN DECEMBER,
1942 *

I am going to talk to you to-day on a subject which has been suggested to me by the answers of students to a question set in one of the Senior's papers. It asks how you would help an older pupil who is horrified by the thought of the endlessness of a future life?

This seems a simple question, but it evokes others more complex, questions concerning time both as we know it, and in its relation to eternity, and arising out of these, the problem of the relation between soul and body.

Let us begin, however, with the sense of horror aroused by the idea of going on for ever and ever and ever; for in these days fear regarding eternal life is not concerned with worries about its unpleasantness nor apprehension of such torment as is portrayed, for instance, in the *Inferno*. It might be better for the youth of to-day if it had a more vivid idea of eternal damnation. Though I do not suggest that the young are in the habit of under-estimating their own deficiencies. But the sense of sin, as separation from God, as a shutting away of the self from communion with God, is not often presented to them, neither is it experienced as a general rule by young people. The horror they feel is rather at the idea of an endless monotony — 'a real nightmare' — as someone expressed it, 'of empty time going on for ever and ever to all eternity.'

But just as we are assured that there is no empty space — it is inconceivable — so we may be convinced that there is no empty time. All time is filled time, filled with events which are dull or interesting at different moments. 'Time' is merely the order or arrangement of the things which happen. Therefore empty time is not possible, and the feeling of horror it begets is the result of harbouring a false idea. The best way to deal with this difficulty in a girl's mind would be to make use of a human analogy to illustrate the difference between real time, that is, lived-time, and clock-time, always the same, irrespective of outside happenings. For example, an hour's clock-time can seem interminable in a dentist's waiting-room with no interest to beguile the hour save a few out-of-date periodicals. But if someone dear and interesting were to enter the room, you would no longer be aware of time, the hour would pass like a moment. It is thus, by the degree of intensity with which one lives in the moment, that time either lags or flashes past. The difference we see here is between *real* time which belongs to our own experience, and clock-time which is useful for practical purposes. Real time can be speeded up or lengthened out almost indefinitely

* By kind permission of Mrs. de Burgh.

according to the experience of the moment. Therefore we may compare the most delightful conversation or sensation, when time is not noticed at all, with an Eternal Present. For Eternity enters the present when time corresponds to the intensity of the experience, when intensity of experience is raised to the highest maximum, for then you will have all the time there is in one moment. Thus, Eternal life can best be likened, not to going on for ever, but to one continuously interesting experience more absorbing than anything possible on earth. As soon as the girl ceases to think of eternal life as mere continuity in time, you will find that the horror is dispelled.

Many imperfect notions of a future life are gathered from the singing of certain popular hymns which are clothed in material imagery borrowed from the Book of Revelation. Phrases such as 'casting down their golden crowns,' and 'prostrate before thy throne to lie and gaze and gaze on Thee,' suggest a cessation of activity which is false. All the same there is more in this material imagery than meets the eye. Our crudest emotions often reflect our highest experiences. One of the most mundane of our emotions on earth is that of falling in love. It happens to nearly everybody. It is almost as common as having sausages for breakfast. And although gazing and looking would not of itself do much to support a conjugal relationship, in the early stages of being in love it affords much joy. Well, this desire to look, raised to the *n*th degree, conveys the same idea of supreme worship as is expressed in the hymn. It describes the greatest activity and self-expression, not monotony and boredom.

Out of this simplified statement regarding time in Eternal Life arise two points of practical application. First, we are all being confronted in these days with the fate of young people said to be cut off in the prime of their strength and in the flower of their existence. But should they not rather be thought of as promising young people singled out by the manager of some firm for highly responsible posts in a larger sphere so that there shall be no waste of merit? They are people who have qualified for a higher order of service.

Again, let us apply the same reasoning to the survivors whose lives would often appear to be marred or even rendered useless. But as we know that those who have gone into a sphere of wider service and higher activity grow in knowledge and strength of character, not remaining as before, but growing and changing as from boy to man, so those who are left must go on and grow. They must not stay dormant, but must grow in knowledge, in a parallel way, while here on earth, thus assuring reunion of spirit and mind with those who have gone ahead. In the fuller experience of a future life, growth is doubtless more rapid, but it is not the point reached but the direction in which each is going, towards the knowledge of God, which matters. For in this knowledge lies all the possibility of the renewal of the union delighted in upon earth. And though here we cannot see God, 'except in a glass darkly,' and we do not know all, since God has not chosen to disclose to us details of the future life, yet we know our direction, which is to know God. That something remains hidden is well, for then our search becomes a matter of faith as well as of reason, increasing our responsibility while upon earth.

In this manner we can suggest the relation between this world and the next, and give the idea of time in the hereafter as an eternal present.

This brings us to the further problem raised by the girl's question, that of the relation between soul and body.

It is not sense to imagine that in a future life we shall be rid of our bodies, since the body forms an essential part of our personality. We have no experience of disembodied existence. The most heroic acts of will bring the body into play; even in mysticism there are no purely spiritual activities. As in this world, so we may believe it is in the next. In Dante's Purgatorio, the redeemed souls are found lamenting the absence of their bodies. The Christian doctrine is of a glorified and resurrected body. The immortality of the soul only was the doctrine of Plato who thought of the soul as imprisoned by the body. The Christian idea is of the Logos, or Word, incarnate: the body is the temple of the Spirit, not an obstacle to its development. Sin is not essentially sensuality; sin is essentially pride, the preference of the self to God. The body is naturally good and perfectable, and evil is an act of the soul, the act of willing wrongly.

Therefore we are to believe in the resurrection of the body, since there is no soul without body, and the body takes its likeness from the soul. We have all heard the saying that a girl at seventeen may be pretty, or not, but it is a woman's own fault if at forty her face is not beautiful. In Paradise the souls of the redeemed express themselves in appropriate bodies. This is not understandable in detail, but it represents the truth of the continuity between the whole self, soul and body, in this life and the next.

Thus we must be careful not to disassociate the body from our thoughts of a future life. If the body is unredeemable and defective, then we have no right to admire the beauty of the Langdale Pikes or anything else physical, since they are far less worthy than the body. The doctrine of the resurrection was the decision to reject the idea that the body is the source of evil. The body as the temple of the spirit retains its selfhood in the future life.

Let us remember (to borrow a phrase again from one of our well-know hymns) that

'In the Land of Beauty
All things of beauty meet.'

B.D. (C.M.C.).